Much of what we currently know about artist Gwyneth Rowlands comes from her manuscript *Fox-hunting*, which she refers to as “a commentary on my life and work.” It exists as collage, with postcards, reproductions of paintings, and family photographs pasted amongst poems which she copied out longhand. Rowlands first mentioned the existence of *Fox-hunting* in 1995. While it is unknown when exactly she began creating the manuscript, it was almost certainly during the period after she left the psychiatric hospital in which she lived until the early 1980s, and its content is intrinsically, although not explicitly, linked to the art she created there. Rowlands edited and revised *Fox-hunting* up until a year before her death in 2009, and today it is held in the Edward Adamson Archive in Wellcome Collection, London, as part of a wider archive of Rowlands’ correspondence.

Born in Epsom, Surrey, in 1915, Rowlands spent her childhood in Sutton, south London. From *Fox-hunting* it is known that, between 1938 and 1946, she travelled widely through Europe, South America and Africa. The manuscript contains some wonderful travel writing: evocative descriptions of alabaster lamps in an Egyptian temple; a lively account of an encounter with a huge tarantula in her bath in Argentina which initiated her hunt for its mate; a period spent recovering from malaria. Of her time spent teaching Jewish children in Berlin during the rise of the Nazis in the late 1930s, Rowlands observes starkly, “And I said nothing,” yet she later reveals that she travelled back to England wearing her Jewish friend’s fur coat and jewellery in order to pass it to a brother who had already fled to the UK.

Rowlands writes little about her life after returning from her travels, except a brief passage covering her concerns about Cold War nuclear proliferation, particularly its effects on children. However, both scholarly and playful, *Fox-hunting* does display a wealth of cultural influences. She was particularly engaged with the poetry of Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney. The former’s profound affinity for the animal world and the latter’s musings on the archaeological and agricultural align with the sensibilities which permeate both Rowlands’ artwork and writings.
The deep time of their geological origin commingles with the immediate moment of their making...
She was admitted to Netherne psychiatric hospital in Surrey in 1962, but – other than a few pictures – her manuscript records nothing of her artistic production during her 20-year stay there. It is known, however, that Rowlands developed her painting skills while hospitalised. She worked in studios provided by Edward Adamson, an artist who was influential in the post-war reiteration of art and mental health, and the evolution of British art therapy (see Raw Vision 72). So dedicated was Rowlands to practising art that she sometimes worked through the night and over weekends, and she was entrusted to opening and closing the studio for other patients when Adamson was on leave.

Rowlands’ earliest works appear to be the product of a decorative, craft-based practice: representational paintings of birds and butterflies on pebbles brought
Untitled
(Small Triangular Flint Head with Large Eyes and Bared Teeth),
1.5 x 3 x 0.5 in. / 4 x 8.5 x 1.5 cm
Untitled (Two Faces in Profile), 4 x 6 x 2 in. / 10 x 16 x 5 cm

Untitled (Mother and Child in Profile), 3 x 5 x 1.5 in. / 8 x 13 x 4.5 cm

Untitled (Woman’s Head in Profile with Circular Decoration), 3 x 4 x 1.5 in. / 8.5 x 10.5 x 4 cm

Untitled (Hooded Woman’s Head), 5 x 9 x 2 in. / 12.5 x 23 x 5 cm

Untitled (Fish with Eyelashes and Red Mouth), 8 x 3.5 x 1.5 in. / 20 x 9.5 x 4.5 cm
Self-portrait 2 (Skull), outer, 5 x 5 x 6 in. / 13 x 13 x 16.2 cm

Self-portrait 2 (Skull), inner

Untitled (Black Madonna with Owl), 3.5 x 5.5 x 1 in. / 9.5 x 14 x 3 cm

Untitled (Standing Figure with Crown), 3 x 6.5 x 2.3 in. / 8 x 17 x 6 cm
to her from Budleigh-Salterton beach by visiting family members. There are variations in the telling of the myth of her creative epiphany but – at Adamson’s suggestion “Why don’t you try something else?” – she began to collect flints from the fields surrounding the hospital and turned her hand to creating the painted objects for which she would become known. (1)

It is tempting to arrange Rowlands’ work to evidence a clear creative trajectory during her years working in Adamson’s studio: to order it so that the early single-subject pebbles evolve into the figurative flints that she transformed into animals, birds, fish and, occasionally, people; then onwards into the works that are so uniquely her own and that combine all her various subject matters, into the dynamic creations that are, perhaps, the most compelling in the collection. However, no such trajectory can be found, other than that between the early pebbles – the painting of which dispelled Rowlands’ early protestations to Adamson that she was not an artistic person – and the majority, created after Adamson’s gentle suggestion to attempt something different.

Rowlands often produced several pieces in a single sitting, so it is likely that animal works might have been made during the same studio session as the ones that show a complex accretion of more cerebral and aesthetic influences. Whimsical animal objects certainly reoccur: a flint becomes a cat or a fish, an animal vertebra becomes a terrier. These appear to have been suggested to Rowlands by the underlying shape of her material and denote playfulness, a gamification of her creative process akin to finding creatures and castles in the clouds. An in-the-moment enjoyment of the asylum’s pastoral setting seems to be reflected in her frequent use of flora and fauna.

In many pieces, drawings cover every plane and face. They are works of abundance, rich with form, line and space. The alchemical blend of influences imbue the objects with a sense of familiarity, but the references are borne so lightly and reside in such singular combination that the frisson of the seen-before gives way to something more enigmatic and intriguing. Complex temporalities elide; the deep time of their geological origin commingles with the immediate moment of their making and the countless hours of work that their intricate patterns and abundant number imply. Their decoration also merges time periods; art histories are interwoven from the bestiaries of medieval tapestries and majuscules by way of Byzantine religious iconography through to cubist overtones and glimpses of Guernica.

Rowlands’ works have a strangeness and uniqueness, each one a world in itself. Although drawing from mainstream culture, she seems to have only created art during her exclusion from society in the interior of the asylum. She found her artistic voice in a new outside: Adamson’s studio, on the outside of the main asylum.

Alongside Fox-hunting, her correspondence with
Alice Jackson, former curator of the Adamson Collection, reveals how Rowlands grew to understand herself as an artist, and her Netherne works as art. Her initial concern, that the anonymity promised by Adamson would be maintained, gave way to an avid inquisitiveness about the life that her works were coming to have in exhibitions. Latterly, she chose to waive her anonymity and often requested photographs of her works in exhibition, sending numerous amendments and directions regarding how her commentary might appear in reproduction. *Fox-hunting* is no secretive reckoning with the past, or indeed any kind of private endeavour: it is a work intended for editor, publisher and audience, and evidence that, by the end of her life in 2009, Rowlands was fully engaged with the legacy of what she had created and understood that an appreciative audience existed for it.

The Adamson Collection Trust holds most of her known work, an estimated 400 objects on a variety of found materials: ceramic piping, metal scrap, bone, and the flints which make up the majority of her oeuvre. A few pieces are in private hands, and a number were gifted by Adamson to the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore in 1995. Adamson exhibited Rowlands’ art for the last time in “Selections from the Adamson Collection” in Ontario in 1984. He died in 1996 and, since 2013, the Adamson Collection Trust has shown a few of Rowlands’ works, mostly recently in “Monochromatic Minds” by the Jennifer Lauren Gallery in London in 2020. A loan to the Wellcome Collection puts six flints on permanent display in the Reading Room. Rowlands’ pieces are deeply haptic objects; even behind glass, they invite touch. They incite an urge to curve one’s hands around air in the shape of them, imagining their cool heft, and provoke a desire to navigate them in three dimensions, to see all their faces and understand their bulk. This is art that the viewer needs to experience in proximity.

The Adamson Collection Trust is working towards a solution to preserve Rowlands’ art and make it available for a wider audience to experience. One proposal is the permanent exhibition of a number of the works in a new building at the Maudsley Hospital in Camberwell, London, for the appreciation of people with lived experience of mental health who are treated there, and of those who work there; a far better fate for the unique pieces than languishing in a vault, and one that aligns with the artist’s desire – as expressed in her manuscript and her correspondence – for her work to be seen.

Notes

David O’Flynn is Chair of the Adamson Collection Trust and on the board of the Bethlem Gallery. He is a psychiatrist, working at both Lambeth and Maudsley hospitals in London.

Rose Ruane is a Glasgow-based artist and writer. She is a PhD candidate at Glasgow University, exploring the Adamson Collection through creative writing.